

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns Update
A periodic report on our work, one issue at a time
August 2007

Agriculture

Why focus on agriculture?

Many Maryknoll missionaries in various countries work directly with farmers and sustainable agriculture. An estimated 70 percent of the world's poorest people are farmers, so agriculture policy has a very direct effect on living and working conditions for the poorest of the poor. Finally, we are involved because, despite the fact that many people consider agricultural policy to be only a rural issue, as a Missouri Farmer's Union bumper sticker says, "If you eat, you're involved in agriculture."

A September 2005 visit from two Mexican farmers has influenced our work in agriculture significantly. Organized by our office along with lay missionary Phil Dahl-Bredine, with whom the two farmers work closely (see OGC Update February 2006, "Voices from the South"), their visit to the Midwest and Washington, D.C. allowed the two farmers to show clearly how current agriculture policy benefits only a small handful of transnational agribusinesses like Cargill, Archers Daniel Midland, and meat packers who receive very cheap feed for their animals while forcing farmers to lose their land and livelihoods. Their conversations with small U.S. farmers showed that the forces driving Mexican growers off their land are very similar to those affecting their counterparts in the U.S. All the farmers were able to clearly see that they are not opponents, as they had thought, but actually allies in a global agricultural system that leaves small farmers out of the discussion.



What is MOGC hoping to accomplish?

We aim to influence these larger forces to bring about a more equitable agriculture policy that allows rural communities to flourish. We have been especially involved in the discussions around the U.S. farm bill that is being debated this year. Although this is mostly a domestic-centered policy, its rules will have significant effects on farmers and poor families around the world. While the debate in most mainstream press has centered on the issue of U.S. agricultural subsidies as the main cause of small farmers' woes, we believe that only lowering these subsidies will not actually bring about higher prices for farmers' products as many expect. We see the need for two fundamental changes in agriculture policy: supply side controls like price floors and commodity boards, and a new push to break down the oligopolies that dominate most every aspect of world agriculture. If these two areas are not addressed, lowering subsidies will not significantly change anything for small farmers around the world.

We do not agree with the myth that only large scale agribusiness will be able to feed the world. Numerous studies show that small farmers are able to produce much more food per acre than large single crop fields that are typical in agribusiness. Small farms also provide much more employment than large scale farming. In addition, agribusiness is highly dependent on oil to

make their fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides, to power the machines that plant and collect, and to transport their products to far away markets. We advocate local food production as a more sustainable, just and healthy alternative. Though prohibited by current trade agreements, governments should be allowed to develop policies to favor local food producers over those from other countries.

How is MOGC working in this area now?

We were more involved in the initial discussions in the different House sub-committees formed to write the farm bill. Unfortunately, the crucial changes that we see as necessary (price floors, supply side solutions, strengthened anti-trust measures) were barely even considered due to such heavy influence from agribusiness. The amendment that came closest to part of what we want was the Fairness in Farm and Food Policy amendment that would have redirected subsidies away from large landowners and agribusiness toward small farmers and environmental protections. Unfortunately, that amendment lost by a vote of 117-309. The Senate will construct its own version of the bill in August and September. Most analysts say that the Senate is even less likely to consider the changes we want, but we will monitor the debates and look for places where we can influence the debate.

With whom is MOGC working on agriculture?

We work especially through the Building Sustainable Futures coalition, a coalition of small farmers' organizations in the U.S. and Mexico, religious groups, environmental organizations, international development organizations, progressive agriculture think tanks, and others. For a complete list of the organizations along with our base statement, go to http://globalfarmer.org/Uploads/bsf_percent20declaration_percent204-3-07-1.pdf.

Some of the groups with whom we have worked more closely include:

- Rural Coalition – www.ruralco.org
- National Family Farm Coalition – www.nffc.org
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy – www.iatp.org
- NETWORK – www.networklobby.org
- Food & Water Watch – www.foodandwaterwatch.org
- National Catholic Rural Life Conference – www.ncrlc.com

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